

Commemorating 20th Century Wars

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The 20th century world wars have had global implications, but their impacts were most devastating in Europe. The European nations suffered catastrophic human loss and massive property destruction. To perpetuate the memory of these tragic events, Europeans interpret 20th-century wars in a sober and reflective manner. Unlike the United States, European countries have not developed large land-based parks to protect battlefield resources. Instead, tragic events are commemorated at national military museums, churches, striking memorial structures, at small portions of extant battlefields, and at the large numbers of well-manicured cemeteries located in many nations. This more modest approach demands less emphasis on land protection, planning, interpretation, and preservation.

Armed conflict in America has been a much more limited and infrequent phenomenon. Perhaps it is for this reason that Americans have directed significant attention to the physical remnants of the few major wars actually fought on American soil by designating a series of land-based parks to preserve hallowed ground while memorializing and interpreting armed conflict. The National Park Service (NPS) has been assigned to protect and interpret many battlefields and militarily-oriented cultural resources. Additionally, there are state, county, and private battlefield sites and parks scattered throughout the United States. The typical battlefield park is now a well-maintained attraction with a visitors center, loop road, interpretive signs, numerous dramatic monuments, and various cultural resources. America's battlefield



Communication Trench, Beaumont Hamel, Somme.

parks and attendant military cemeteries offer a roadside educational and entertainment package. The European sites necessitate visitors to be more self-directed. There is less emphasis on the preservation of adjacent hallowed ground. The American approach to battlefield commemoration generally does not hold true for similar resources in Europe where smaller land based units and less publicly-financed facility development is apparent. Europe's approach is serious and reflective, less entertaining. Europeans place less emphasis on public recreation and interpretation while dramatically symbolizing the costs of war at somber battlefield cemeteries and memorials.

The Europeans generally do not emphasize the land-based military park approach for interpretive or commemorative purposes. It is difficult to discern the damage and wreckage of war. For the most part, the land has been returned to its traditional rural agrarian tillage or village use. Instead, one learns about the cost of war through old photos, films, books, and in museums. Privately-owned informal museums display pieces of trench lines, military hardware, and documentary remnants.

Dramatic evidence of these ancient killing fields is marked by numerous cemeteries maintained by the nations whose dead lie there. Visitors view the carnage of war through the sheer number and scale of military cemeteries dotting the countryside. For example, in the Somme River valley of northern France, many crossroads are marked with small signs directing the traveler to World War I cemeteries. In Europe, cemeteries provide the principal link to 20th-century wars; subsidiary ties include cultural resources such as memorials, trench lines, pill boxes, and statues.

The Allied military cemeteries including British, Commonwealth, French, and American sites present a sad but uplifting image with their white crosses, broad vistas, and low lying walls. Allied cemeteries range in size from just a few graves to large burial areas containing thousands of graves. American cemeteries are generally well signed to direct visitors. At these cemeteries the headstones are arranged symmetrically in all directions. Invariably, the cemeteries are adorned with local plantings and flowers and the area's military action is often depicted in stone on a large wall map.



British Memorial, Somme, near Albert, France.

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Presentation of the major 20th-century wars varies greatly depending on whether a nation experienced victory or suffered defeat. On the Allied side, in every village, town, and city (many crossroads too) one can see a memorial, statue, or plaque to honor the fallen. The sheer volume of memorials and names denoting World War I dead is much greater than World War II. In France the positive symbolic perception of its success in WWI is just the opposite of its collapse a generation later. For example, it is difficult to find large WWII memorials. The



Vimy Ridge, Northern France.



Verdun. Original memorial with subsequent plaques attached.

1940-45 years are usually denoted by a modest plaque attached to the heroic style ubiquitous WWI memorials.

In Germany, it is difficult to find similar memorials. All that can be discerned in many places is a small WWI memorial plaque, an occasional minor statue, or merely a boulder inscribed with the dates 1939-1945. Germans have tended to put the great 20th-century conflicts behind them. It is far easier to find memorials commemorating the success of German arms during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The gigantic mythic “Germania” statuary ensemble overlooking the Rhine commemorates German unification led by Kaiser Wilhelm I in the early 1870s.

German cemeteries appear severe, reflecting a sense of loss of life and national spirit. In many instances, Germans were buried in mass graves; a typical inscription on a sarcophagus stone may read “Here Rest in a Common Grave 4829 German Soldiers of the World War 1939-1945.”

The German burial areas, especially those located in foreign lands, are located in remote areas. Not until the 1950s were agreements made between the invaded nations and the Federal Republic of Germany to set aside land for fallen Germans. In Germany itself the cemeteries are generally situated in pleasant locales.

Besides these cemeteries, the most dramatic wartime evidence generally only reaches back to WWI—a protracted conflict primarily fought in the trenches in northern France and Belgium known as the Western Front (although military action occurred in many lands). The Western Front stretched from the Rhine Valley, westward through northeastern France, then northward to Belgium and the North Sea. It is possible to tour extant sites in this area which became the locale of numerous costly battles between the invading German Army and the Allied forces comprised mainly of the French, British, and the Americans. Several of the great battles included Verdun, the Marne River valley battles, the Somme, Vimy Ridge, and the Ypres Salient. Late in the war, Americans fought at Chateau Thierry, Belleau Wood, the St. Michel Salient, and the Meuse-Argonne campaigns. No extensive parklands (comparable to our national park system units) at the national or provincial levels have been set aside or established to commemorate the catastrophic events that occurred between 1914 and 1918.

Despite the fundamentally different approach to war interpretation, several noteworthy interpretive sites exist in France commemorating WWI with actual battle-related structures. The Newfoundland Memorial at Beaumont Hamel has limited acreage which includes shell-pocked landscape and trench lines; a large elk statue symbolically denotes the province’s heritage. At Vimy Ridge in Picardy a 250-acre battlefield park with trenches and an underground tunnel tour with bilingual guides from Canada provides a dramatic interpretation of past events. A large memorial overlooks the actual ridge where thousands of Canadians died. This memorial erected in the 1920s symbolizes the heavy loss of Canadian troops, and pays special homage to the missing.

Verdun provides a much different experience. A 50-mile tour route takes the visitor to massive underground forts and several hilltop military objectives such as Monte Facon and Hill 409. A huge ossuary (*Ossuaire de Douaumont*) contains the bones of 50,000 French soldiers.



Somme Crossroads. British/French cemetery markers.



German Cemetery, Luxembourg, near Ham.

Visitors can peer through ground-level windows to view the unidentified human remains. This open display of physical remains at ossuaries is a more literal, funereal style of interpretation. The battlefield region has museums and the interpreted ruins of destroyed villages, (now just shallow depressions with signs denoting locations of the city hall, schools, shops, and houses). One particularly grim site at Verdun is a trench (*Tranchee des Baionnettes*), which was filled by a large German shell and in which was buried a line of French soldiers with fixed bayonets. Now only the rusted tips of the bayonets remain pointing skyward protected by a modest canopy. Throughout the Verdun region many skull and crossbones signs warn visitors not to enter fenced-off areas that still (78 years later) contain unexploded shells. The French take a grim and sober view of losses to their nation during the Great War. Unlike the strong and erect British military statues found in English communities, at Verdun an especially dark view of war is symbolized by a statue of a dead French soldier depicted in Medieval sepulchral style.

At another area on the Western Front in Flanders in southwestern Belgium, one encounters the Ypres Salient. Battlefield guides and tour maps can be secured for personal self-guided tours while commercial tours with a guide (a traditional European approach) are available for those so inclined. One dramatic Canadian monument (the sculpted head of a soldier looking downward) marks the site near St. Julien where the first deadly poison gas attack was launched on the Allies in 1915. At Passchendaele, a few miles northeast of Ypres, the gentle slope of the topography that made the village such a significant military objective can still be seen. Only a few feet separate the “ridge” from the low-lying areas to the west—a feature that cost a huge number of Allied casualties. The higher ground meant much to military success for defending forces.

Second World War commemoration also relies on statues and cemeteries, but places large emphasis on military hardware such as guns and tanks. The Normandy invasion area and the Battle of the Bulge are well marked and signed. Tanks, landing craft, and mammoth gun emplacements attract visitors. Numerous appreciative memorials and statues commemorate the rank-and-file GI, General Patton, and American action in Belgium/Luxembourg’s Ardennes in late 1944-early

1945. A star-shaped American memorial on Mardasson Hill just east of Bastogne honors those who fought to free Belgium. This large memorial contains 10 huge stone slabs upon which is detailed an account of the battle. Three chapels hewn into the rock below offer a secluded place for meditation. Erected in 1950 and paid for by the Belgians, the memorial is in need of massive repairs. There is less commemorative evidence that can be easily found at Dunkirk on the French/Belgium border. A small French cemetery east of the city graphically depicts how the May-June, 1940 withdrawal developed along the coast of the English Channel. Nearby one can inspect deteriorated remnants of Hitler’s Atlantic Wall fortifications developed a few years after the evacuation along the shoreline.

The northern countries remember the great 20th-century conflicts. For example, Finland interprets the Salpa (Lock) Line that extended from the Gulf of Finland to Salla in Lapland. At a small roadside interpretive site in southeastern Finland, the visitor can view trench lines, tank traps (dragon’s teeth), and pill boxes that still contain authentic anti-tank weapons. One can feel a remnant sense of pride that, despite their losses, this small country was not afraid to stand up for its beliefs. In many of the country’s military cemeteries in further honor of the fallen Finnish soldiers of both world wars, upon each grave was planted a simple but elegant red rose. Invariably in the Finnish military cemeteries a heroic-style soldier statue overlooks his slain brothers. A Finnish cemetery on the Western Front east of Reims illustrates the international scope of the Great War. Norway has developed a museum at an old fort in downtown Oslo to remember the years that country suffered under Nazi occupation. Realistic interpretive displays depict the war years and the costs of a harsh military regime on a resisting citizenry.

Europe’s southern nations also remember the high costs of wars in the 20th century. Italy has constructed many elaborate memorials with dramatic military statuary. A large ossuary near Gorizia (northeast of Venice) honors those who fought at Caperotto in 1917 as well as other battles on the Austrian front. Monuments honoring irregular Communist forces that fought in WWII can be found in this same area. Northeastern Italy witnessed fierce fighting between the Nazi forces and left-wing par-

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tisans on the Yugoslavian border. Roadside memorials frequently display a red star on a boulder or masonry structure with a narrative of the local action and names of the fallen inscribed on a plaque. Although Greece succumbed quickly to the Nazi invader in 1941, many dramatic roadside memorials with flowers and lighted candles honor thousands of Greeks massacred by the Nazis in retaliation for resistance attacks on the invader.

In eastern Europe one can see many heroic-style monuments to the victorious Soviet forces that swept through this area in the winter/spring of 1945. One of the more outstanding examples is located on a hill overlooking the Danube in Budapest. A huge victory statue has a number of inscriptions on it that celebrate the role Russia played in the liberation of Hungary from Nazi forces in 1945. (Usually the liberated nation had to pay for the construction of these monuments.) Another striking monument is the Soviet war memorial located just west of the Brandenburg Gate in central Berlin. From here one could view the goose-stepping Russian honor guards protecting the memorial with its eternal flame. In northeastern Poland the former East Prussia frontier is not interpreted but 1930s era trench lines, covered by large pine trees, parallel the highways. Informal rest stops with wooden tables offer entry to these almost forgotten military remnants. A small memorial is located in the rural community of Bialowieza in eastern Poland depicting local partisans who died fighting the Nazi invader. This memorial has a plaque attached to a large boulder; wreaths and an eternal flame symbolize the spirit of the Polish resistance. Near Warsaw in the midst of Kampinos National Park is located the Palmiry Memorial Cemetery. This sacred site memorializes some 1,100 Polish citizens summarily executed by the Nazis.

Europe's commemoration of the Nazi concentration camps projects a grim picture of the Third Reich. Existing structures and complexes were recycled to serve as prisons. For instance, the structures at the concentration camp in the Munich suburb of Dachau served originally as the Royal Bavarian Gun Powder factory. Another prison outside of Antwerp was originally a major fort—the National Memorial of Fort Breendonk honors the 4,000 Belgians incarcerated there.



Terezin, Czechoslovakia, Nazi concentration camp.

The Dachau facility is described in the visitor information booklet as a memorial site in the former concentration camp. Interestingly, this Dachau information brochure clearly acknowledges and describes the existence of the concentration camp in a section entitled "The Years of Terror, 1933-1945." This tourist-oriented booklet speaks directly to the issue, and doesn't avoid responsibility for the Nazi regime.

In the eastern countries the Nazi issue seemingly is treated somewhat differently. For instance at Terezin, Czechoslovakia, a community originally located on the frontier between Austria-Hungary and Prussia, an 18th-century fort was used by the Nazis as a concentration camp. The dire fate of the nation's political and economic victims is interpreted in a museum located in the former concentration camp. Despite the many photographic displays and accompanying text, very little material interprets the fate of the Czechoslovakian Jewish population incarcerated in the nearby showcase town ghetto known as Terezin-Staat. The visitor can learn more about Terezin-Staat at interpretive displays in the St. Joseph district (the former Jewish ghetto) in Prague than is possible at the actual site. Several small museums are located in abandoned Jewish synagogues.

Many forms of commemoration exist in Europe regarding the cost of the 20th-century world wars. While lacking a formal park system such as that found in the United States to commemorate war, Europeans acknowledge their human tragedies through dramatic war memorials and statues as well as large and small displays of military artifacts. War cemeteries are maintained in abundance. While this approach may have a different focus than America's land-based commemorative parks, the impact is riveting. Indeed, for Europeans themselves or for visitors from other lands, the disastrous 20th-century wars have not and can not be forgotten.

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Finnish Cemetery, Helsinki, Finland.